It's not my fault! Emotional Intelligence and Blaming Others

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ABSTRACT

Some people blame others for negative outcomes regardless of who is actually at fault. Why is this? Perhaps people who blame others are not in control of their own emotions. This study examined the relationship between other-blame and Emotional Intelligence – the ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions. Thirty-four participants completed the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), which measures these four branches of Emotional Intelligence. Participants also completed the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS). This scale is usually used to assess the depth and breadth of understanding of emotion words. However, in this study, four LEAS items were scored for other-blame. In these items, something bad happened and participants were asked to describe how they felt. Scorers determined if participants blamed no one, themselves, another person, or the situation. To assess the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and the tendency to blame others for one's misfortunes, the scores on the other-blame scale were correlated with the four branches of the MSCEIT for each of two raters.

This version of the blaming-others scale is useful for research purposes. Inter-rater reliability was high (r = .89), demonstrating that the scoring rules are adequately clear. In addition, the correlation between managing emotions and other-blame for Scorer A was significant and negative ($r(31)$ = -.35, p = .05), as expected.

Future research should do three things. First, future research should use a larger sample. This study used only 34 participants, which limited statistical power. Second, future research should refine the other-blame scoring rules. The correlation between other-blame and managing emotions was only significant for one of the two scorers, which could signify that the other-blame scoring rules were ambiguous. Clarifying the scoring rules might also improve inter-rater reliability. Third, future research should examine the cause of the relationship between other-blame and managing emotions. Perhaps the relationship depends upon who the person thinks is responsible for their emotions, a variable that might be referred to as locus of control for emotional experiences.

INTRODUCTION

People are likely to blame another person for their misfortune if they conclude that they were harmed through the unjustifiable, inexcusable, and intentional acts of that person (Shaver, 1985). However, people have to make decisions about whether the other person acted in an intentional and unjustifiable way (Hall & Marteau, 2003). Some people blame others for almost all negative outcomes regardless. Why is this? Perhaps people who blame others are not in control of their own emotions. This study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and the tendency to blame others for ones misfortunes.

Several studies have examined the relationship between other-blame and emotional outcomes. For example, Madden (1988) found that blaming ones husband for a miscarriage was associated with greater depression. Timko and Janoff-Bulman (1985) found that other-blame was associated with greater depression and worse mood and self-esteem in women who had undergone mastectomy. Taylor, Licktman, and Wood (1984) found that blaming others was related to greater psychological distress among women who had been treated for breast cancer. Additionally, a few studies have examined the relationship between other-blame and variables that are related to emotional and social intelligence. For example, Phillips (1968) found that blame is connected to social competence and perceptual development, suggesting immature social functioning when other-blame occurs. Additionally, blaming others is related to the inability to control one's anger (Kuppens & Mechelen 2007). These studies suggest that there may be a relationship between other-blame and Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional intelligence is "The ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). Those who have higher levels of emotional intelligence tend to engage in more pro-social behaviors and have greater success at school and the workplace (Salovey & Grewel, 1990). The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002a, 2002b) is the most widely used measure of emotional intelligence skills. It measures four branches of Emotional Intelligence. The first branch, Perceiving Emotions, is defined as the ability to identify emotion in faces, voices, and in one-self. Perceiving emotions is a basic skill in emotional intelligence and it is a prerequisite for other emotional intelligence skills (Salovey & Grewel, 1990). The second branch, Using Emotions, is the ability to use emotions to support thought processes and problem solving. It is an essential skill that allows a person to identify certain emotions that would best guide a specific type of thinking (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). The third branch, Understanding Emotions, is a person's ability to comprehend emotion language and differentiate between similar emotions, such as sad and miserable (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). The last branch, Managing Emotions, is the ability to control emotions in oneself and in others. For example, someone who is good at managing emotions in other people might be able to evoke a desired emotional response in others by describing an emotion (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). Together, these four branches of Emotional Intelligence represent the skills that allow a person to process emotional information to enhance thought processes and guide action. We hypothesize that all four branches of Emotional Intelligence will be negatively related to the tendency to blame others for one's misfortunes.

METHOD

Participants

Participants consisted of 34 (24 females, 10 males) university students who participated in this study in return for course credit. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 (mean 19.12, standard deviation 1.37). Of the participants, 44.1% identified themselves as Caucasian, 14.7% as African American, 11.8% as Asian, 23.5% as Hispanic, and 5.9% as Pacific Islander.

Measures

Other-blame was measured using a new other-blame scoring key for the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin, 1990; Lane, 1991). The LEAS consists of 20 scenarios that are designed to elicit one of four types of emotions (happiness, anger, fear, or sadness). Each scenario involves two people, the self and another person. Participants are asked to describe how they would feel and how the other person in the scenario would feel, using as much or as little space as needed. The LEAS is usually used to measure emotional awareness, the ability to differentiate emotion words and use them in a complex fashion. To score the LEAS for emotional awareness, the LEAS Scoring Manual (Lane, 1991) is used. However, in this study, the LEAS responses were scored for other-blame, using a new scoring key. Four scenarios were selected based upon the impression of the first two authors that many participants tend to blame others in these scenarios (items 2, 9, 14, and 17). For these four items, each response was assigned a score between 0 and 4, by each of two raters, based upon the scoring key in Table 1. During data analysis, scores of 0 and 1 were combined into a single category (1), so that higher scores indicate more other-blame. For each rater, a total other-blame score was calculated by summing the other-blame scores for the four items.

Table 1

Other Blame Scoring Key

Score	Interpretation
0	Blames no one for bad things that happen
1	Blames self entirely for bad things that happen
2	Partially blames other people for bad things that happen (or holds them responsible), but also says that the self is partially to blame. Might blame other people or an institution or a situation. Code all of those as blaming others.
3	Blames other people entirely for bad things that happen (or holds them responsible)

The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002a, 2002b) is a 141-item scale that measures four branches of Emotional Intelligence: perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotion (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003). Branch 1, Perceiving Emotions, was measured using two tasks: the Faces and Pictures tasks. For each task, several stimuli (either faces or pictures) are presented. Participants are asked to indicate the extent to which certain emotions are present, using 5-point rating scale. Branch 2, Using Emotions, was measured with the Sensations and Facilitations tasks. In the Sensations task, participants match emotions to sensations. In the Facilitations task, participants indicate the extent to which different moods would assist in several different cognitive tasks. Branch 3, Understanding Emotions, is measured with the Blends and Changes tasks. In the Blends task, participants identify which emotions can be merged to generate a target emotion. In the Changes task, participants indicate what emotions results from the intensification of another emotion. Lastly, Branch 4, Managing Emotions, was measured with the Emotion Management and Relationships tasks. In the Emotion Management task, participants identify the actions that are effective in attaining specific emotional outcomes. In the Relationships task, participants indicate what actions are most effective in managing another person's emotion. The MSCEIT is scored using consensus scoring. For example, if 15% of respondents in the norm group answered E to a particular question, then everyone who answered E for that question is given a score of .15. For this study, consensus scores were calculated by the test publisher.

Procedure

Participants completed the LEAS and MSCEIT as part of a larger study. Participants completed the study online, without supervision. To reduce fatigue, participants were allowed to divide the study into two sessions.

Statistical Analysis

To assess inter-rater reliability of the new other-blame scale, the correlation between total other-blame scores for Scorer A and Scorer B was calculated. To determine the relationship between other-blame and Emotional Intelligence, the other-blame scores for the two raters were correlated with the four branches of the MSCEIT.

RESULTS

To assess the quality of the new rating scale for blaming others, we calculated the correlation between the two raters. Inter-rater reliability was high ($r(32)$ = .89, p < .001). This demonstrates that the scoring rules are clear enough for research purposes.

To determine if emotionally intelligent people are less likely to blame others for their misfortunes, we calculated eight correlations. For each of the two scorers, we calculated the correlation between the other-blame scores and the four branches of the MSCEIT (see Table 2). Only one correlation was significant: the correlation between managing emotion and blaming others for Scorer A ($r(31)$ = -.35, p = .046). As expected, this correlation was negative.

Table 2

Correlations of the Four Branches of the MSCEIT with Blaming Others

Scorer	MSCEIT Branch			
	Using Emotion	Understanding Emotion	Managing Emotion	Perceiving Emotion
A	-0.25	-0.13	-.35*	-0.25
B	0.10	0.05	-0.26	0.04

* p <.05

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between other-blame and Emotional Intelligence. We hypothesized that those who tend to blame others for their misfortunes would have lower skills in perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions effectively. We correlated the four branches of the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) with other-blame scores for two scorers. Only one of these eight correlations was statistically significant. For Scorer A, there was a significant negative correlation between other-blame and the ability to manage emotions.

The negative relationship between other-blame and the ability to manage emotions might be caused by an external locus of control for emotional events. In general, people with an external locus of control attribute outcomes to external factors such as other people (Rotter, 1954). More specifically, people with an external locus of control for their emotions might think that other people are responsible when they feel bad (e.g., they might think, "You made me angry" rather than "I am angry"), and that other people are also responsible for making them feel better (e.g., they might think, "You must apologize or make up for it" rather than "I must calm myself down"). If those same people have low skills at managing their own emotions, they might blame people for their undesired emotional experiences. In contrast, people with an internal locus of control for their emotions might blame themselves for their undesired emotional experiences. They might think that they are responsible for feeling bad when bad things happen, and that they are responsible for continuing to feel bad afterwards. If people with internal locus of control for emotions also have high skill at managing emotions, they might take credit for feeling good. However, if those same people have low skill at managing their emotions, they might blame themselves for how they feel. These hypotheses should be tested in future research.

The correlation between managing emotions and other-blame was significant for only one of the two scorers. This suggests that the scoring key is not as precise as it could be. Scoring the LEAS items for other-blame requires subjective judgment, and the current scoring key may not provide adequate guidance on how to resolve ambiguous responses. Because of this, the two scorers may have resolved ambiguous responses in slightly different ways, resulting in significance for only one of the two scorers. Though inter-rater reliability was relatively high and is acceptable for research purposes, it would be possible to obtain higher values of inter-rater reliability.

In the present study, other-blame was scored using a 3-point scale. After recoding during data analysis, a score of 1 was given if the participant blamed no one or themselves; a score of 2 was given if the participant blamed both themselves and an outside factor; and a score of 3 was given if the participant only blamed the situation or another person. Perhaps other-blame could be more clearly measured if it was not confounded with self-blame. Each item response could be scored on two dimensions: the extent of self blame (0 = none, 1 = partially blamed self, 2 = completely blamed self) and other-blame (0 = none, 1 = partially blamed other, and 2 = completely blamed other). Future research should also examine alternative methods of assessing other blame, by a careful examination of previous research. Whatever scoring method is used, future research should assess the inter-rater reliability of the revised scale.

Future research is needed to clarify the relationship between other-blame and Emotional Intelligence. First, the other-blame scoring key should be revised to ensure greater agreement between raters. Second, future research should test the hypothesis that an external locus of control for emotional events moderates the relationship between managing emotions and other-blame. This could be done by developing a scale to assess whether a person has an internal or external locus of control for emotional events. A moderation analysis could then be undertaken to determine if this new variable moderates the relationship between other-blame and Emotional Intelligence. Finally, future research should use a much larger sample. In this study, only 34 participants were used. This may have reduced that statistical power of the study. Future research involving a moderation analysis will require a much larger sample.

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